

## Questions and Answers

### Final Designation of Critical Habitat for Pagosa skyrocket (*Ipomopsis polyantha*), Parachute beardtongue (*Penstemon debilis*), and DeBeque phacelia (*Phacelia submutica*)

#### What is the DeBeque phacelia, and where does it live?

DeBeque phacelia is a rare annual plant that grows on barren patches of shrink-swell clay of the Wasatch Formation. Nine populations that include 22 occurrences on 626 acres of habitat are known in the southern Piceance Basin of Mesa and Garfield Counties, western Colorado. The species is threatened by habitat modifications from natural gas exploration and production with associated expansion of pipelines, roads, and utilities; development within the Westwide Energy Corridor; increased access to the habitat by off-road vehicles; soil and seed disturbance by livestock and other disturbances.

#### What is the Pagosa skyrocket, and where does it live?

Pagosa skyrocket is a rare plant known from only two populations near Pagosa Springs, Colorado. Highly restricted soil requirements and geographic range make it particularly susceptible to extinction due to commercial, municipal, and residential development and the associated road and utility infrastructure. Other threats include heavy livestock use, fragmentation of habitat, and prolonged drought. About 87 percent of the species' occupied habitat is on non-federal land with no protections.

#### What is the Parachute beardtongue, and where does it live?

Parachute beardtongue is a rare plant known from four viable populations that grows only on oil shale outcrops on the Roan Plateau escarpment in Garfield County, Colorado. The total estimated number of plants is fewer than 4,200 individuals. Oxy USA and Occidental Oil Shale (OXY) owns land that contains 69 percent of the total plants on 48 percent of the occupied habitat. Portions of the OXY property are designated as a Colorado State Natural Areas, and are managed under a voluntary conservation agreement to protect the plants and its habitat. BLM manages about 19 percent of the total plants on 39 percent of the occupied habitat. Threats to the species and its habitat include natural gas development, oil shale mine reclamation, road maintenance, inadequacy of existing regulatory mechanisms, and stochastic events. The species' entire range is within the southern part of the Piceance Basin, which contains one of the largest natural gas reserves in North America.

#### What is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's determination regarding critical habitat for DeBeque phacelia, Pagosa skyrocket, and Parachute beardtongue?

For DeBeque phacelia, the Service is designating 25,484 acres of critical habitat in nine units with 86 percent of area on Federal lands. All of these nine units are currently occupied.

For Pagosa skyrocket, the Service is designating 9,642 acres of critical habitat in four units with 18 percent of the ownership Federal and the remaining largely on private lands. Two of these units are almost entirely on non-federal lands and are currently occupied by the plant. Two of these units are entirely on U.S. Forest Service lands, are not currently occupied, and are included for future introductions.

For Parachute beardtongue, the Service is designating 15,510 acres of critical habitat in four units with 90 percent of the ownership being Federal and the remainder largely on private lands. Two of these units are occupied, and two of these units are currently unoccupied and included for future introductions. We are also excluding areas designated as Colorado State Natural Areas, and surrounding lands, from the critical habitat designation because of the conservation practices in place on these private properties.

In total, the Service is designating 50,526 acres in 17 units as critical habitat for these three species.

### **Why did the Service designate these areas as critical habitat?**

When listing species, the Service is required to also designate critical habitat unless the benefits of exclusion outweigh the benefits of specifying an area. We are designating these areas because we believe them to be necessary for the conservation and recovery of the species.

### **What is critical habitat?**

Critical habitat is a term used in the Endangered Species Act that refers to specific geographic areas that contain habitat features essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species. These areas may require special management considerations or protection for the species. For more information on critical habitat please visit: [http://www.fws.gov/endangered/esa-library/pdf/critical\\_habitat.pdf](http://www.fws.gov/endangered/esa-library/pdf/critical_habitat.pdf).

### **What is the purpose of critical habitat?**

Critical habitat is a tool to identify areas that are important to the conservation and recovery of a listed species. It is also a tool used to notify Federal agencies of areas that must be given special consideration when they are planning, implementing, or funding activities. Federal agencies are required to consult with the Service on actions they carry out, authorize, fund, or permit, that may affect critical habitat. A critical habitat designation has no effect when a Federal agency is not involved. For example, a landowner undertaking a project on private land that involves no Federal funding or permitting has no additional responsibilities if his or her property falls within critical habitat boundaries.

### **Do listed species in critical habitat areas receive more protection?**

A critical habitat designation does not set up a preserve or refuge. It only affects activities with Federal involvement, such as Federal funding or a Federal permit. Listed species and their habitats are protected by the Endangered Species Act whether or not they are in areas designated as critical habitat. Designation of critical habitat can help focus conservation activities for a listed species by identifying areas that contain the physical and biological features that are essential for the conservation of that species. Critical habitat also alerts the public as well as land management agencies to the importance of these areas.

### **Do Federal agencies have to consult with the Service outside critical habitat areas?**

Even when there is not critical habitat designation, Federal agencies must consult with the Service, if an action that they fund, or authorize, or permit may affect listed species.

### **Will a critical habitat designation for these plants affect use of my personal property? Will this result in any taking of my property?**

The designation of critical habitat on privately-owned land does not mean the government wants to acquire or control the land. Activities on private lands that do not require Federal permits or funding are not affected by a critical habitat designation. Critical habitat does not require landowners to carry out any special management actions or restrict the use of the land.

If a landowner needs a Federal permit or receives Federal funding for a specific activity, the agency responsible for issuing the permit or providing the funds would consult with the Service to determine how the action may affect these species or their designated critical habitat. We will work with the Federal agency and private landowner to modify the project to minimize the impacts.